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FM USINT HAVANA
TO RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID IMMEDIATE 0142
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA IMMEDIATE 0037
RUEHDG/AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO IMMEDIATE 0030
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3805
INFO RUEHWH/WESTERN HEMISPHERIC AFFAIRS DIPL POSTS IMMEDIATE
RUCOGCA/NAVSTA GUANTANAMO BAY CU IMMEDIATE
RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHMFIISS/Joint STAFF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHMFIISS/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL IMMEDIATE
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUCOWCV/CCGDSEVEN MIAMI FL IMMEDIATE
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3806

C O N F I D E N T I A L HAVANA 000816

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR WHA/CCA; NSC FOR SENIOR DIRECTORS KORZAK AND FISK

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/15/2018

TAGS: CU PGOV PHUM PINR PREL

SUBJECT: DAMAS TELL FIRST LADY ABOUT HURRICANE DEVASTATION

Classified By: COM: Jonathan Farrar: For reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On October 16, seven members of the group Damas de Blanco, an organization of the relatives and supporters of Cuban political prisoners, spoke by video conference with First Lady Laura Bush, and Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez. The Damas described the dire situation of some of their members and the Cuban population after the impact of hurricanes Gustav and Ike. The First Lady and Secretary Gutierrez detailed the rejection by the Cuban government of four U.S. offers of aid, as well as a commitment to try to assist the Cuban people through private organizations. The Damas stated that some people have received assistance from private U.S. organizations. The Damas interpreted remarks of Secretary Gutierrez as indicating a commitment to approving a 90 day extension of OFAC licenses to NGO's. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On October 16, members of the organization Damas de Blanco spoke by video conference with First Lady Laura Bush and Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez. The participants in Havana were Laura Pollan, Noelia Pedraza Jimenez, Clara Lourdes Prieto, Julia Nunez, Tania Morejon Soca, Yaneris Perez and Olga Lilia Gonzalez. The Damas expressed appreciation of the Bush administration's constant commitment to democracy in Cuba.

¶3. (C) Spokesperson for the group, Laura Pollan, stated that "Cuba is in ruins" after hurricanes Gustavo and Ike and expressed deep disapproval of the decision of the Cuban government to reject humanitarian assistance for ideological reasons. Clara Lourdes described massive devastation in her home province of Isla de la Juventud. The First Lady and the Commerce Secretary stated the U.S. government continues to explore the possibilities of sending aid through private organizations.

¶4. (C) Pollan stated that several Damas had received cash assistance sent by the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) and the Florida based NGO, Plantados. These funds have been sent directly to individuals through Western Union. Pollan earlier gave Poloff the names of a number of the

members of Damas de Blanco who have received such funds. Pollan said that some churches in Cuba are making locally organized relief efforts. USINT has forwarded lists of dissidents who were severely affected by the hurricane, but very few of these people have said that they've received any assistance.

¶ 15. (C) Pollan asked for a 90 day extension on the granting of OFAC licenses to NGO's for hurricane-related relief. Secretary Gutierrez stated that the matter was complicated and was being explored. However, it was clear afterwards that the Damas interpreted those comments as a firm commitment for such an extension.

¶ 16. After the video conference, Pollan remarked that in the past some U.S. based organizations such as GAD (Grupo de Apoyo a La Democracia) actually delivered aid items, such as clothing and medicine to the Damas which they in turn used to support victims of previous hurricanes, but this has not happened in over a year. She stated that it has become increasingly difficult to get assistance to political prisoners and their families.

FARRAR